

Today, Reps. Pete Stark, Sherrod Brown, Richard Gephardt, Charles Rangel, John Dingell, and others announced the introduction of the Medicare Early Access and Tax Credit Act, with companion legislation introduced in the Senate by Senator John Rockefeller. If enacted, the legislation would provide a new health insurance option for millions of uninsured Americans over age 55.

The bill provides new insurance coverage options through a Medicare buy-in for certain people aged 55 through 64 or through a special COBRA continuation program for workers aged 55 through 64 whose employers renege on the promise of retiree health coverage. The legislation also provides for a new 50% federal tax credit for individuals taking advantage of these new coverage options. The tax credit is designed to increase the affordability of this new option.

“We join together today to introduce an improved version of the Medicare Early Access Act in order to make sure that more people age 55 through 64 are able to take advantage of this important addition to the marketplace,” Rep. Stark said. “People age 55 and over are very vulnerable to loss of health insurance. And, with the aging of the baby boom generation, this is a quickly growing segment of our population. In 1999, there were 23.1 million Americans in this age group. There are expected to be 35 million by 2010 and 42.5 million by 2020. Clearly, we need to take real steps to address the concerns of this population.”

Senator Rockefeller stated, “The problem of the uninsured continues to plague our nation, and it is particularly severe for older Americans who are facing the loss of health coverage but who are not yet eligible for Medicare. Our legislation would create the opportunity for people between 55 and 64 to access Medicare, which is really the only affordable option for this group. But that is still too expensive for many people. By adding a 50% tax credit, we're making this option available to a broader range of people.”

Rep. Brown continued, “Our health insurance system fails many Americans, especially those aged 55 through 64 who have lost their coverage. They often can't get insurance because it is prohibitively expensive or pitifully inadequate. Our bill offers these individuals a practical, fiscally responsible solution through Medicare.”

Rep. Stark concluded, “The Medicare Early Access and Tax Credit Act is not the full

solution to solving America's health insurance coverage problems. But, it is a small, simple and obvious step that opens new doors to a vulnerable segment of our population who are lacking affordable coverage elsewhere – and who would welcome the opportunity to buy into Medicare at an earlier age. I urge my colleagues to join with us and take this small step to make health insurance a reality for people who are not yet eligible for the safety net of Medicare.”